FOR BETTER OR WORSE
Ephesians 3:14-19
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In the late fifties Leonard Bernstein collaborated in a Broadway Musical which caught the temper of the times with delightful accuracy. One song in particular satirized the best thinking the culture had done about the institution of the family, and the test of parenting, and who, ultimately, bears responsibility for the results.

A gang of quasi-delinquents sing it, poking fun at the sociological, psychological, anthropological jargon with which we explain, deviant, anti-social behavior. The setting is their imminent arrest at the hands of their old nemesis, Officer Krupke..."Dear kindly S;t. Krupke you gotta understand it's just our bringin' up that gets us outa hand...Our mothers all are junkies, our fathers all are drunks; golly Moses, naturally we're punks...We're very upset. We never had the love that every child ought to get. We ain't no delirquents; we're misunderstood.Deep down inside us there is good..." After they have run through the catalog of sociological disciplines, singing the lines of social worker, analyst, physician, finally they must deal with the blunt reality of the police...They sing:

"O, Officer Krupke, you've done it again.
This boy don't need a job, he needs a year in the pen.
It ain't just a question of misunderstood:
Deep down inside him, he's no good!
...We're no good, we're no earthly good.
The best of us is no damn good."

From a Calvinistic point of view, that's a word that needs to be said as well. But the first part: parents bearing ultimate responsibility for children's behavior, better represents the way our culture thinks about the subject. With that philosophic basis our culture concluded sometime in the past twenty years that the family as institution, perhaps even monogamous marriage, was in deep trouble.

We noted dutifully that authoritarianism, in all its expressions, was an obsolete and ineffective model for twentieth century institutions. We watched change happen in the role of women in the society in general and in the way society prescribes the task of mothering and fathering. We watched in dismay as a youth-counter culture emerged, expressing tragic alienation, propelled by an old reality with a new name - generation gap. It was not a happy time for the family.

In a recent Christian Century essay, J. Wesley Brown writes:

"The past seventy years have been rather hard for parents in our society. They have suffered under a misunderstanding fostered by some branches of psychology which implied that parents were to blame for every hair-brained thing their children did wrong." Brown tells about leading child development seminars which inevitably included a "super mother" - "who has read everything on child psychology she could get her hands on, has found out that most of them disagree with each other about a number of things and is immobilized with the fear that if she frowns at her two year old when he throws his oatmeal on the cat the child will develop a complex and join Hell's Angels when he is 17." (Christian Century, 5/6/81. p.513).

The pendulum, apparently, is on the way back. Behaviorists are reassessing the dynamics which resulted, not particularly in better children, but certainly more guilty parents. After several generations of assuming that every personal

flaw in the child reflected a character deficit in the parent, we are happily discovering that sometimes it isn't that simple. Sometimes parents do the right things and their offspring don't turn out as planned. More importantly we have rediscovered that parents are human too, with needs of their own; that they are not failed deities, but flawed human beings.

Beneath it all, the family, which a decade ago appeared moribund, appears to be reemerging strongly. The Futurist Magazine is a resource one might expect to be advocating radical social change. The April issue concluded, however, that... "Despite evidence of increased marital instability, the vast majority of Americans continue to express great satisfaction with both their marriages and their families." (The Futurist, April 1981, p.3).

Psychology Today published a Daniel Yankelovich piece, "New Rules in American Life" which startled me with this. "When experimentation with variations of family life slows down, as it will, we can expect the idea of the family to revive, at least in the residual form of the mated couple." (April 1981, p.86).

Alvin Toffler's The Third Wave defines the global future which is emerging. One would expect his prognostications on the family to be frightening. Listen to what he says..."The home will assume startling new importance...everything points to the home's reemergence as a central unit in the society of tomorrow - a unit with enhanced, rather than diminished, economic, medical, educational and social functions." (Cultural Information Service, 3/31/81, p.11).

For Better or Worse marriage and family will be around for a long time in something very near the forms in which we now know them. We can claim, or course, that in our better moments, we knew it all along. Those of us blessed by a 3,500-year-old Judeo-Christian heritage stand in a long line of people who regard the relationship of men to women, parents to children, and the society in general to the home as part of God's economy, the divine plan. When the church gets into the act we use words like these..."Let us reverently remember that God has established and sanctified marriage for the welfare and happiness of humankind."

St. Paul, bachelor, certainly no advocate for the home, or marriage, nevertheless made an important assumption when he wrote: "For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named..."Family is built into the fundamental order of things. God is source, creator, upholder, strengthener of family...nuclear family, extended family, church family, and that wider network of caring relationships we experience as human family...God is in the family business.

May I suggest very briefly three ideas that are important for the health of the institution? They are not new, but they are, it seems to me, newly important. The first idea is limits, the voluntary limitation of one's own possibilities because of the relationship. Feminists will never forgive St. Paul for "wives, submit yourselves to your husbands." He wrote that two thousand years ago, of course, but more importantly, first he wrote, "Husbands and wives, submit yourselves to each other."

Joseph Sittler observes..."Without limitation there is no expansion. Without the risk of promise there is really no joy...The problem with the temporary, ad hoc relationships which many people enter into today is that when there is a way out, the couple deprive themselves of going all the way in." (Christian Century, 9/26/79, p.916).

The second idea is loyalty. The more I think about it, the more loyalty becomes a synonym for love - in marriage, family, friendship, church. Try it on for a moment. To love someone - is to be loyal to her, him, them. To love is to stand with, protect, defend, advocate, cheer for, through thick and thin to be with, and to pray for someone. To love, I have concluded, has more to do with loyalty than feeling mushy inside.

Grace, finally. Amazing grace - undeserved, unmerited love that reaches out and accepts and embraces at the very moment we are most unlovable. Amazing grace that loves the child when he or she is most socially unacceptable and therefore needs love most urgently. Grace that loves the husband when he is most thoughtless and the wife at the very moment she is most insensitive. Grace that forgives and accepts and in that forgiveness and acceptance creates an environment of freedom so blessed some would call it salvation. Yankelovich reported what I thought was a very funny episode in the journalism business. Playboy Magazine retained Lewis Harris to conduct a national survey to discover "what people seek in an ideal lover" assuming, of course, that the answers would provide tantalizing material. To the magazine's dismay, however, twenty percent said something about physical attributes. Fifty-three percent said an ideal lover is "someone to be totally honest and open with". Needless to say that won't sell magazines. What it means is freedom, acceptance, at-one-ness - words which point to that special Christian word we learn from Jesus - Grace.

Grace makes the difference. Grace is what Christians have to contribute to the cause. Grace is what can make a family of people who are unrelated to one another. Grace makes something special out of the ordinary; grace made a cross the symbol of love.

Professor Sittler includes, in one of his essays:

> "...a story by Flannery O'Connor in which she tells about an old couple who had lived in the Appalachians all their lives in a little cabin overlooking the opposite mountain. They were sitting there - both very aged people - in their rocking chairs on a spring day. The man said, 'Well, Sarah, I see there's still some snow up there on the mountain.' Now he knew there was snow on the mountain every year. She knew there was snow every year. So why does he have to say it?" Sittler concludes: "In marriage you say the same things over and over, you inquire about the same people; and this is ho-hum in one way. But it is breathtaking in another. (Marriage and Snow on the Mountain, p.17-19, Grace Notes and Other Fragments).

It is of God, we believe. Invested with a little grace, it is life-giving, beautiful, bearing something of the love of God itself.

Amen.

God of love, the human family takes its name from you. You have been mother and father to us. You have accepted, forgiven, held us in love, and given us gifts of courage, strength, and hope. Bless us: bless the families of this congregation: and grant us grace to enjoy one another in Your love: through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.